MYSPACE, FACEBOOK, AND THE STRENGTH OF INTERNET TIES:
ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING AND BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Online social networking sites seem particularly well-suited to forming the loose connections between diverse social networks, or weak ties, associated with bridging social capital, but is using one site the same as using another? This study explores the user and usage characteristics of two popular social networking websites, Myspace and Facebook, and then investigates the relationship between online social networking and bridging social capital using survey data from 929 university students and faculty members. Myspace users tend to have less education and be more racially diverse, have lower incomes, and focus more on forming new social ties online. Conversely, Facebook users tend to be better educated, have higher income, and focus more on maintaining relationships with their existing offline ties. A positive association exists between the degree of online social networking and bridging capital, although there was no meaningful difference in bridging capital between those who used Myspace only and those who used Facebook only. However, the results indicate that the use of Myspace in conjunction with Facebook significantly increases bridging capital and moderates the effect of race, income, and degree of usage. Together, this evidence suggests that online social networking is a useful tool for enlarging and maintaining a diverse social network, but that the examination of online social networking in the aggregate may hide distinctions among sites. Different sites are used in different ways, and thus using more than one site might provide the greatest benefit in terms of increased bridging capital.
DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this work to two amazing women: Dr. Jennifer Holz and Dr. Rebecca Erickson. One taught me early on why “sociology is the mother of all disciplines,” and one has been steadily teaching me how to make it my own. They have told me hard truths when I needed to hear them, helped me move past my failures, and joined me in celebrating my successes. For all the many times they convinced me to try something I did not want to do, I am now a much better person for it. For all the countless times they endured my tears and my frustrations without judgment, I am truly appreciative. Most importantly, for all the times they believed in me even when I could not, I am eternally grateful. Without their untiring patience, thoughtful feedback, and constant encouragement, I never would have applied to graduate school much less made it through the first year. I owe them both an exceptional debt of gratitude, and I can only hope to one day become as wonderful a teacher, mentor, and friend that they have each been to me.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Social researchers have long stressed the importance of social networks. A social network is essentially a configuration of relationships, or social ties, between people—the ways in which they are connected through various other individuals ranging from casual acquaintances to intimate family members (Lin 2001; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006; Putnam 1995). These connections generate social capital that serves many important functions: it is a source of emotional and economic support, educational and employment opportunities, and information about the world at large. Thus, through their influence on the development and maintenance of social capital, the type and span of the social networks people develop have a profound effect on the structure of their daily lives.

Thanks to the Internet, physical distance is now less of a barrier to social networking than ever before in human history. Individuals are able to stay in frequent contact with geographically distant social ties without face-to-face interaction by using a variety of electronic tools. Many websites provide Internet users with a venue specifically designed for developing social networks. These networks comprise “virtual communities” that individuals use to articulate current relationships with friends, family, and colleagues, as well as to create new social relationships (Donath and boyd 2004; boyd 2004; Stern 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2006). Due to the global nature of
online communication, often the new relationships that users form with each other are loose and fairly heterogeneous connections that are nevertheless vital components of an individual’s overall social network (Granovetter 1973; Haythornthwaite 2002; Putnam 2000).

Although an exhaustive list is unavailable, it is estimated that the World Wide Web hosts well over 200 active social networking sites specifically tailored to fostering such loose ties, with even more sites appearing on a regular basis (boyd 2006b; Jones 2002; Rainie and Horrigan 2005). Myspace, arguably one of the most well-known social networking platforms, claims more than 95 million registered users, while the equally well-known Facebook recently reported a growth rate of 116 percent over the prior year (Jones 2002; Nielsen 2008). Particularly for teens and young adults, becoming a member of at least one social networking website has become something of a cultural requirement in American society. Given that the potential benefits of social capital depend largely on one’s social network, it is important to understand how online social networking may influence the production of social capital.

Research is beginning to emerge regarding the social influence of computer-mediated communication (e.g. Galston 1999; Kavanaugh et al. 2005; Wellman et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2003) but as yet few have investigated the role of social networking websites. Studies that do address online social networking often look at sites as an aggregate (e.g. Donath 2007) or only consider a single site (e.g. boyd 2004; Ellison et al. 2006; Liu 2007). Yet, such an approach may conceal important differences. Some research and much anecdotal evidence suggests that user characteristics vary by the type of website, particularly between the two most popular sites Myspace and Facebook.
(Hargittai 2007; NetPop Research 2008; Tancer 2007). If systematic differences in user base exist at the site level, then the potential benefits or consequences for social capital may also vary by site. This article seeks to help fill the gap in existing literature by focusing on the effect of online social networking as a whole, but also by individually considering the use of Myspace and Facebook. My research is guided by three broad questions: 1) who uses social networking sites; 2) how are the sites used to manage social relationships; and 3) how is the use of social networking sites related to social capital?

Social Capital

Social capital is a concept widely discussed among social scientists, yet it encompasses such a complex set of variables that there is no singular meaning or measurement tool (Lin 2001). A common starting point is Bourdieu’s (1986) definition: “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). In other words, social capital is the sum of resources a person is able to draw upon as a result of social connections with other individuals. The resources derived from these relationships can take a number of different tangible and intangible forms, ranging from a financial loan or a place to live to prospects for a job opportunity or a potential mate (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000; Lin 2001). Hence, membership in many different groups as opposed to just a few is advantageous for individual agents. Many researchers have documented the association between social capital and positive outcomes for physical health (House et al. 1988) education (Coleman

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Various dimensions of social capital associated with different types of relationships have been identified in the literature, but the most common is the distinction between bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital is the product of strong social ties: close-knit relationships that are built on similarity, intimacy, and frequent contact, such as those between family members and close friends (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1995; Williams 2006). These tend to be homogeneous, exclusive connections that generate what Coleman (1988) termed “thick trust” between individuals who share similar backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions. Bonding capital offers the most in terms of consistent emotional support and the ability to garner economic assistance when needed.

By contrast, bridging capital arises from connections between diverse networks. It is the product of the weak ties that occur when people from different backgrounds form loose relationships with each other (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000). Weak ties tend to be socially heterogeneous and less costly to maintain than strong ties in terms of time and emotion. Such connections generate a “thin trust” that is more inclusive of a broad range of people (Coleman 1988). Networks of weak ties are less likely to offer strong substantive support, but the advantages of bridging relationships include exposure to alternative cultures and perspectives, generalized trust between networks, and access to additional resources unavailable through bonded connections—an effect Granovetter (1973) called the “strength of weak ties.” Indeed, a number of researchers suggest that social capital benefits significantly from a large, heterogeneous intersection of social
networks characterized by weak ties (e.g. Wellman and Wortley 1990; Putnam 1995; Donath and boyd 2004; Woolcock and Narayan 2000).

Putnam (2000) described four distinct dimensions of bridging social capital: 1) An outward looking perspective includes a willingness to entertain the viewpoints of others and to consider experiences outside of one’s own daily existence; 2) Contact with a broad range of people refers to relationships between individuals who might otherwise be considered unlikely acquaintances, e.g. people of differing class, race, religion, education, or political affiliation; 3) A view of oneself as part of a broader group involves considering oneself a member of a larger community, e.g. identifying simultaneously as an Ohioan, an American, and a world citizen; 4) Diffuse reciprocity with a broader community involves giving to others without directly expecting something in return, such as holding the door open for a stranger whose hands are full or volunteering for charity organizations. Whereas bonding capital constitutes a kind of “sociological superglue,” the dimensions of bridging capital provide “sociological WD-40,” a vital element of a smooth-functioning and civil society (Putnam 2000:22).

By linking individuals and groups to others outside of their own closely-bound networks, bridging social capital can improve individuals’ ability to mobilize resources and increase their commitment to community well-being, among other benefits (Granovetter 1973; Helliwell and Putnam 2004). Bridging capital may also be particularly important for fostering attitudes of tolerance and acceptance of difference (Hemmer et al. 2006; Norris 2002). Given the increasingly polarized political, cultural, and religious atmospheres within contemporary society, it is essential to expand understanding of how people connect with diverse others.
Certainly, bridging social capital alone is not an exclusive solution to complex social problems, but it is surely an important variable. As Estlund (2003:108) noted, bridging relationships are essential because they encourage compromise and cooperation, cultivating “feelings of connectedness and empathy across rather than within lines of social division” (emphasis added). In terms of the wider society, promoting ways for people to create/maintain weak ties and produce bridging capital may be a vital step toward overcoming social distance and reducing antagonism between dissimilar groups.

Bridging Capital and the Internet

In 2000, Putnam identified a trend of decreasing participation in a variety of civic venues—e.g. bowling leagues, churches, parent-teacher organizations, and fraternal clubs—as evidence of a serious decline in America’s bridging capital. He cited increased use of electronic forms of entertainment and communication as one of the notable contributors to declining bridging capital, stopping short of including the then-emerging Internet as part of the trend. Numerous researchers responded with theoretical and empirical criticisms of Putnam’s claims. For instance, Paxton (1999) questioned the conceptualization of social capital and whether Putnam’s research (among that of several others) adequately linked theory and measurement. Alwin (2002) further argued that Putnam had overextended generational arguments and neglected important factors such as cohort aging patterns and historical events. Contending that there was in fact no deterioration of social capital in the U.S., Ladd (1996) presented data showing increases in philanthropy and voter turnout.
While there has been ongoing debate about his data and whether the measures of voluntary civic participation constitute evidence of a significant decline (e.g. Fischer 2005; Rotolo and Wilson 2004; Sampson et al. 2005; Wuthnow 1998), Putnam’s focus reiterates the importance of networked social relationships. Indeed, subsequent researchers have posed similar concerns and presented some evidence of declining network size and rates of socializing with friends and family (e.g. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006). Concurrently, however, Internet use has become integrated into everyday life as a location for social exchange. This suggests that traditional measures of face-to-face relationships may no longer be sufficient. Web users are not merely passive recipients of asocial text on a computer screen but rather active contributors and collaborators within a virtual environment. Social and civic venues have changed—many people now use the Internet as a way to garner social support (Bargh and McKenna 2004), attend group or club meetings (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2001), connect with charity organizations (Rainie and Horrigan 2005), and engage in political debate and activism (Smith and Rainie 2008). Participation in social life is no longer limited to the borders of physical spaces, so the examination of network trends and the production of social capital should not exclude Internet interaction.

Over the last decade, a growing number of researchers have begun to examine the ways that online communication affects social relationships. Much of the initial debate concerning Internet use and social capital was polarized (Williams 2006). Several early studies predicted that the Internet would greatly aid social communication and strengthen social bonds (DeKerckhove 1997; Lévy 1997), while others argued that it would simply isolate people from their families and communities (Nie and Erbing 2000; Nie 2001).
One of the first longitudinal studies to specifically track online behavior initially reported that Internet use only marginally enhanced the number of weak ties online while simultaneously decreasing social connections that existed offline (Kraut et al. 1998). Other theorists have echoed concerns of progressive isolation by warning that Internet use is inherently an individual activity that could promote a weakening of shared norms and values and an estrangement from local relationships (Wellman et al. 2001). Later researchers refuted these claims, noting that time spent online cuts into television viewing and other solitary pursuits rather than social activities (e.g. Kestnbaum et al. 2002; UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2001). In a follow-up study, Kraut and colleagues (2002) found that the negative effects of Internet use on social involvement and well-being reported in their earlier study had largely disappeared.

Online-only connections may be inherently fragile due to the rapidly-changing and impersonal nature of the Internet (Galston 1999; Haythornthwaite 2002). Developing weak ties online involves relatively low costs of entry into a virtual community, but such relationships may be fleeting because the cost of exiting the group is similarly small. An Internet membership can be ended, a chat session closed, or an email deleted in a fraction of a second without any personal interaction, thereby limiting the potential for such ties to translate into bridging capital. In addition, online relationships may contribute little to bridging social capital in the long-term because individuals and groups who share a single specific interest may turn out to be more homogeneous than not (Wellman and Gulia 1999).

Despite concerns that online social connections may be too transitory or delicate, some emerging research evidence indicates that the Internet supports rather than hampers
the production of bridging capital (Horrigan et al. 2001; Kavanaugh et al. 2005; Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004; Wellman et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2003). Internet communication encourages the formation of weak ties by reducing or removing geographical, economic, and ideological barriers to social interaction, bringing together very different people. Computer-mediated communication can strip away the traditional visual and aural cues of social identity, potentially promoting heterogeneity because “on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Christopherson 2007:3038). In an online forum discussion, for example, a teenager may freely share political ideas alongside a middle-aged businessman, while a young woman in India may find common ground chatting with an American co-ed—conversations that are undoubtedly less apt to occur offline. In a Pew Internet and American Life Project report (Rainie and Horrigan 2005), almost 84 percent of users indicated that going online has increased their interactions with people outside their social class, racial group or generational cohort. One recent study also reported that after Hurricane Katrina, Internet users in New Orleans drew on the diverse weak ties they formed online as an important source of informational support and resources (Procopio and Procopio 2007).

Online Social Networking

Online social networking seems particularly well-suited to the creation and maintenance of bridging capital, perhaps even more so than other Internet activities like blogging or email, because social networking sites specifically depend upon social interaction and the formation of weak ties (Donath and boyd 2004; Wellman et al. 2001). The very purpose of the social networking sites is for users to amass many online friends
and link them all together. As boyd (2004:4) explains, online social networking involves “the public exhibition of private relationships in order to allow for new private interactions.” Recent studies on Friendster and Facebook show that most users do have large, diffuse networks of online relationships from which they draw resources and information (Donath and boyd 2004, boyd 2006a, Ellison et al. 2006).

Thus, online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may instead be used as an extension of it. Social networking sites offer the opportunity for expanding weak-tie networks without the usual requirement of physical co-presence, a distinct advantage in an environment in which busy lives and geographical distance may limit face-to-face contact with diverse others. Given prior research, I expect that engaging in online social networking is associated with increased bridging social capital. Since frequency of use may facilitates the growth of weak-tie networks, I also anticipate that more intense participation (e.g. logging in more often and for longer periods of time, maintaining contact with a greater number of online friends) yields greater gains in terms of bridging capital. Furthermore, I expect that users have more bridging capital than non-users.

H_1: Social networking intensity is positively related to bridging social capital.

H_2: Social networking site users have more bridging capital than non-users.

Myspace versus Facebook

Social networking sites provide a new way to bridge various social networks, but the question remains whether people use the sites in ways that effect real change. Is online social networking just a useless fad or is it a beneficial mechanism for improving
social cohesion? Depending on the specific user, online social networking could be a valuable tool for broadening social relations and information exchange, which ultimately helps both individuals and communities. Conversely, users who only connect with people they already know or who are limited to contact with people similar to themselves may gain little in terms of bridging social capital.

While current research supports the premise that users’ bridging capital likely benefits from online social networking regardless of site, some scholars also point out that there may be systematic differences in the types and activities of users, specifically in regard to Myspace and Facebook usage. Both sites offer a number of common features such as status updates in which users leave short sentences on their profile describing current activities or mood, a public area for friends to leave comments, a private email inbox, shared photo albums, and the ability for a group of users to create a commonly shared page. Yet, the two venues are often popularly considered to represent opposite ends of the social networking site spectrum because distinctions in the design appeal to different audiences (e.g. Sullivan 2007; Tancer 2007).

One of Myspace’s most identifying features is profile customization. A user may change his or her page background, graphics, and the layout of items as often as desired—visiting 100 different profiles is almost certain to yield 100 different designs. In fact, a substantial number of third-party websites are devoted solely to providing customized snippets of code for Myspace pages. The site also allows users to make blog posts without actually maintaining an outside blog and to easily embed music files into a profile. The ability to incorporate music has become notable as a way for bands to let fans share and download new music and for industry scouts to discover new talent. The
earliest adopters of Myspace were teenagers and the site has remained popular with users under 21, although the number of older users has been continually increasing each year especially among those over 40 (NetPop 2008).

By contrast, Facebook’s profile pages are static and consistent. Each user’s page background is white and, with the exception of some optional content boxes, the general layout of items on the page stays the same. Changes in fonts, colors, and graphics are not allowed, but Facebook users can personalize their profiles with hundreds of developer-created and user-created applications, optional pieces of content that range in purpose from pure entertainment (e.g. mini-games) to pure business (e.g. free conference calling). The site was originally only available to college students and thus, the average user is currently in college or a college graduate. However, in 2005 Facebook changed its policies to allow anyone to register an account, and the site has since seen steady growth among all demographic groups (NetPop 2008).

Taken together, the different characteristics of Myspace and Facebook may also suggest that existing social inequalities are being reproduced within online networks. Hargittai (2007) found that poorer and Hispanic students were significantly more likely to use Myspace than a number of other social networking sites, as were students whose parents had not graduated from high school. At the same time, wealthier white and Asian students and those whose parents were college-educated were much more likely to use Facebook than any other site. In addition, boyd (2007) suggests that Myspace attracts users seeking to “play” with personality, explore new identities, and meet new people, while Facebook tends to attracts users who wish develop professional connections or to upkeep offline contacts after a major life change such as starting college or a new career.
Although Facebook and Myspace are commonly perceived as the binary ends of a social networking continuum, there is no existing research directly comparing the two sites or examining any specific differences in the ways the sites are used. To address this gap, my investigation includes a descriptive exploration of user characteristics and usage patterns by site based on two questions:

Q1: Are there differences in social status (sex, race, income, and education) between Myspace and Facebook users?

Q2: Are there differences in the ways people use Myspace and Facebook?

Following anecdotal evidence and the suggestions of boyd (2007) and Hargittai (2007), I suspect that Myspace users will tend to have less education and be more racially diverse, have lower incomes, and focus more on forming new online ties. Conversely, I anticipate that Facebook users will tend to be better educated, have higher incomes, and focus more on maintaining offline contacts. Because there is very little established literature on this topic, this part of the current study should be considered exploratory.

More importantly, however, the current study contributes to existing literature by considering how the influence of online social networking varies according to site. If bridging capital is affected by the tools used to produce it, then the use of a particular site matters—examining online social networking solely under the umbrella of a singular phenomenon may disguise differential effects. To extend Putnam’s (2000) analogy, this may be akin to the distinction between asking whether people engage in any bowling and asking whether or not they bowl with a league. If using Myspace is qualitatively different than using Facebook, then site type may moderate the relationship between online social networking and bridging capital. For instance, the suggestion that Myspace users tend to
be more diverse, and Facebook users more socially homogeneous, implies that Myspace is better for building bridging relationships. It also stands to reason that if sites do vary in terms of how they are used, then those who use Myspace in conjunction with Facebook get “the best of both worlds” and thus may stand to benefit the most in terms of bridging capital. Thus, I propose the following:

H₃: Myspace users will have more bridging capital than Facebook users.

H₄: Those who use both Myspace and Facebook will have more bridging capital than those who use only a single site.

H₅a-b: The relationship between online social networking and bridging capital is moderated by type of site use: (a) Myspace only compared to Facebook only, and (b) use of both sites compared to use of a single site.
CHAPTER II

METHODS

Data andSample

The data presented here were collected during the summer of 2008 from undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty at a Midwestern university. Undergraduate data were collected via written in-class questionnaires. A convenience sample of 22 introductory and upper-level courses, excluding independent study and individual research courses, were randomly selected for participation from the university’s summer course catalog. A total of 337 in-class surveys were completed out of the 373 students officially registered in these courses, a response rate of 90.1 percent. One written survey was excluded due to large amounts of missing and illegible data.

Because it was impractical to use the same procedure to gather data from faculty and graduate students during the summer semester, I used a web-based version of the survey containing the exact same questions as the undergraduate student questionnaire. A letter explaining the research and a link to a secure survey form hosted on the university server was emailed to 2,843 faculty members and graduate students listed in the university’s directory. The online questionnaire was accessible to potential respondents via the email invitation link for a three-week time period. A total of 601 faculty and graduate student respondents completed the web survey for a final response rate of
21.1 percent. Eighteen web surveys were excluded due to large amounts of missing data or duplicate submission. These analyses are based on the remaining 929 respondents: 346 undergraduate students, 206 graduate students, and 377 faculty members. To examine the representativeness of the final sample, I compared the respondents’ demographic characteristics to statistics from the university’s most recently available report. Compared to the university population from which it was drawn, females are over-represented among undergraduate students but are under-represented among graduate students. Whites are over-represented among graduate students. The sample also under-represents male faculty. There were no other substantial differences between the available university data and the sample in terms of gender or racial composition.

Measures

**Bridging Social Capital:** The dependent variable for this study, bridging social capital, was measured using an adapted version of Williams’ (2006) Internet Social Capital bridging sub-scale. The scale consists of ten items designed to gauge the four distinct dimensions of bridging capital suggested by Putnam (2000): outward-looking perspective (e.g. “Interacting with people makes me curious about other places in the world”); contact with a broad range of people (e.g. “I interact with people who are from different racial or ethnic backgrounds”); a view of oneself as part of a broader group (e.g. “Interacting with people reminds me that everyone in the world is connected”); and

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1 Although this rate appears fairly low, it falls within the typical range for web surveys that offer no direct incentive to respondents and are not supplemented with hard-copy mailings or telephone calls (see Kaplowitz, Hadlock, and Levine 2004; Lesser and Newton 2002). In addition, it is entirely possible that a portion of those who did not participate were simply not checking university email during the summer break.
diffuse reciprocity with a broader community (e.g. “I spend time participating in groups and organizations”). Possible responses were presented in 5-point Likert format ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Alpha reliability for the bridging capital scale is .87.

**Online Social Networking:** The primary independent variable of interest, online social networking, was measured by asking respondents whether they had a registered account (a) with any social networking website, (b) with Myspace, and (c) with Facebook. This created four sub-groups of respondents: non-users (n=359), Myspace only (n=114), Facebook only (n=194), and users of both (n=262). Because Myspace and Facebook usage are not mutually exclusive, however, using both sites is confounded with using one or the other. Thus, instead of dummy-coding the responses, I used contrast coding to allow for the direct comparison of specific groups instead of simply comparing one group with all others (McClendon 2002). The three contrasts are Non-user vs. User, Myspace only vs. Facebook only, and Uses both sites vs. Uses only one site. Each contrast is orthogonal, or independent, from the others and represents a test of significant differences between the associated comparison groups.

**Social networking intensity** was measured using an adapted version of Ellison et al.’s (2006) Facebook Intensity scale. Two sets of questions were presented to respondents—one set specific to Myspace intensity and one specific to Facebook intensity. Each set consists of eight items designed to assess the frequency of usage (e.g.

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2 Respondents were also asked whether they used other sites and to name the site(s), but no respondent indicated using the “other” site only. That is, all respondents who indicated being a member of any social networking site also indicated being a member of Myspace and/or Facebook.
“How often do you usually spend using your account per login session?”), number of weak ties (e.g. “how many online “friends” do you have?”), and level of commitment to participating (e.g. “I update my profile often”). Responses were summed, and a total social networking intensity scale was constructed by averaging the two site-specific scores for respondents who indicated using both sites. For users who reported using Myspace only or Facebook only, the relevant site-specific score was used instead. Non-users were assigned a score of zero. The social networking intensity scale ranges from 0 to 24 and alpha reliability is .871.

**Site Usage:** Several 5-point Likert scale items asked respondents about the type of activities pursued on each respective social networking site. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement that they regularly engaged in each the following: Entertainment (e.g. music, games); Finding people with shared interests; Checking out people met in person; Searching for old classmates or friends; Workplace or school communication, and Keeping in touch with family and friends living far away. Two individual items were used to gauge how users manage offline and online relationships. One item assessed the degree to which users maintain offline ties (“I spend time in person with most of the people on my Myspace/Facebook friends list”), and one item measured the degree to which users form new online ties (“I meet a lot of new people on Myspace/Facebook”). For use in the descriptive analyses, all of the aforementioned items regarding site usage were coded 1 for responses of “Agree” or “Strongly Agree,” and all other responses were coded 0. To further explore users’ subjective perceptions of online social networking by site, the survey included additional open-ended questions: “What do you feel is the most positive aspect of using Myspace/Facebook?”; “What do you feel is
the most negative aspect of using Myspace/Facebook?"; and “Which site do you prefer to use, and why?”

Social Status Variables: Respondent’s gender was dummy-coded (female=1, male=0). Respondent’s race was similarly dummy-coded as white=0, nonwhite=1.3 Household income was measured by the respondent’s report of his or her family’s total annual earnings in dollars. Because income typically has a skewed distribution, the income variable was logged for use in regression. University status measures the respondent’s position as a student or faculty of the university. Possible responses ranged from freshman undergraduate, sophomore undergraduate, junior undergraduate, senior undergraduate, graduate student, adjunct faculty, assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor. For use in the analyses, university status was collapsed into dummy variables reflecting three larger classifications: undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty, which serves as the omitted category. Because respondent age in years is highly correlated with university status (r = .814), age is included in Table 1 for descriptive purposes only. A set of preliminary analyses (not shown) using age instead of university status revealed no substantive change in results. The inclusion of university status is useful because it represents qualitatively different groups categorized by level of education and occupational status that are not adequately captured by age alone, so age was dropped from subsequent analyses.

3 The questionnaire included seven possible response categories for race/ethnicity, but there were relatively few respondents in some categories. I ultimately collapsed race into white/nonwhite for the analyses presented here. However, preliminary tests suggested that the influence of race varies. For instance, being black was positively associated with bridging capital, but being Hispanic was negatively associated and Asian was non-significant. Future studies should consider oversampling minority respondents.
Analysis Strategy

First, I use descriptive statistics and qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions to investigate whether there are differences in social status and usage characteristics between Myspace users and Facebook users. Since this portion of my research focuses on identifying general tendencies by site rather than on significance testing, the descriptive analyses compare all Myspace users as a group to all Facebook users as a group. Although some respondents are included in both categories, this approach allows me to use as much of the data as possible (instead of limiting cases to only those who use one site or the other) in order to examine the similarities and differences in the broad patterns of use associated with Myspace and with Facebook.

Next, to examine the influence of online social networking on bridging capital, I regressed bridging capital on the social status variables and the online social networking variables. To determine whether type of site is a moderating influence, I then conducted a regression including interaction terms for gender, race, income, university status, and social networking intensity by each of the contrast variables. An increment to $R^2$ test was used to identify whether this interaction model significantly increased the variance explained by the main effects model. Lastly, I conducted separate regressions for the contrast groups.
CHAPTER III
RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the aggregate sample and then separately for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Women constituted 54 percent of the full sample, and 85.7 percent of the respondents were white. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 with a mean age of 35.2 years, although approximately half of the sample (49.1 percent) was younger than 28 years of age. Average household income level was $78,099. Nearly 62 percent of all respondents (n=570) were registered members of one or more social networking websites, and more respondents indicated being a member of Facebook than Myspace (48.8% versus 35.4%). Almost 33 percent of the sample reported using more than one social networking site. Average bridging social capital score was moderately high at 3.814.

Not surprisingly given the age differences, online social networking was much more popular among both undergraduate and graduate students than faculty, although nearly a third of faculty reported using at least one social networking site. Among undergraduates, the percentages of Myspace and Facebook usage were similar, but the use of Myspace dropped to approximately half that of Facebook among graduate students and faculty. Undergraduates also reported using both sites in greater proportion (54.5%) than graduate students (34.5%) and faculty (13.79%). Bridging social capital was highest among faculty (M=3.986) and lowest among undergraduates (M=3.637).
Table 3.1. Means, proportions, and standard deviations of study variables for full sample and by university status group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Status</th>
<th>Full sample (n=929)</th>
<th>Undergraduates (n=346)</th>
<th>Graduate Students (n=205)</th>
<th>Faculty (n=377)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45.96%</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>40.18%</td>
<td>0.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54.04%</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>59.82%</td>
<td>0.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>79.66%</td>
<td>0.403</td>
<td>75.89%</td>
<td>0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>20.34%</td>
<td>0.403</td>
<td>24.11%</td>
<td>0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>$78,099</td>
<td>$61,134</td>
<td>$64,878</td>
<td>$56,557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>36.17%</td>
<td>0.481</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>22.17%</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>40.58%</td>
<td>0.491</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Social Networking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses any site</td>
<td>61.36%</td>
<td>0.487</td>
<td>88.39%</td>
<td>0.321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myspace User</td>
<td>35.41%</td>
<td>0.479</td>
<td>64.29%</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook User</td>
<td>48.76%</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>72.32%</td>
<td>0.448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses both sites</td>
<td>32.94%</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>54.46%</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridging Social Capital</td>
<td>3.814</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>3.637</td>
<td>0.544</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Among those respondents who use social networking sites.*
Comparison of Myspace and Facebook usage

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for each site by user characteristics and type of use. Returning to Q1 regarding differences in social status (sex, race, income, and education), there appear to be several aspects on which Myspace and Facebook users differ. Little variation emerged between the two sites in the proportion of male to female users, but a greater proportion of minority than white respondents used Myspace. More than one quarter of Myspace users were nonwhite, compared to less than 17 percent of Facebook users. In addition, average household income was lower for Myspace users ($54,890 versus $63,514). As might be expected, undergraduate students were more likely to use Myspace, but graduate students and faculty were more likely to use Facebook. Taken together, these findings support the premise that race and class make a difference when it comes to online social networking—users with lower social status and less human capital tend to use Myspace rather than Facebook.

The usage patterns described in Table 2 also help address Q2 regarding differences in the ways people use Myspace and Facebook. A much greater proportion of Facebook users indicated using the site to check people out, to search for old classmates or friends, or for workplace/school communication. Conversely, more Myspace users reported using the site for entertainment and meeting many new people online, although a relatively high percentage (63%) also indicated using the site to maintain contact with geographically distant family and friends. However, there is no substantial difference in the degree of blending offline and online relationships—approximately 45 percent of
Table 3.2. Means and proportions of social status, site usage, social networking intensity, and bridging social capital for Myspace users and Facebook users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Myspace (^a) (n=359)</th>
<th>Facebook (^b) (n=453)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59.57%</td>
<td>56.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40.43%</td>
<td>43.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>74.61%</td>
<td>83.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>25.39%</td>
<td>16.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household Income</strong></td>
<td>$54,890</td>
<td>$63,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>University Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>65.65%</td>
<td>53.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>19.76%</td>
<td>28.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>14.59%</td>
<td>18.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Site Usage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Login Frequency</td>
<td>3.024</td>
<td>3.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Time per Login</td>
<td>1.337</td>
<td>1.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of contacts in friends list</td>
<td>3.769</td>
<td>4.232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Activities(^c)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment (e.g. music, games)</td>
<td>40.37%</td>
<td>17.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find people with shared interests</td>
<td>12.54%</td>
<td>9.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check out people met in person</td>
<td>36.78%</td>
<td>54.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for old classmates or friends</td>
<td>53.68%</td>
<td>73.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace or school communication</td>
<td>24.54%</td>
<td>54.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep in touch with family and friends living far away</td>
<td>62.69%</td>
<td>72.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintaining and Creating Social Ties</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spends time in person with most people on friends list</td>
<td>44.68%</td>
<td>45.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets many new people online</td>
<td>22.30%</td>
<td>10.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Networking Intensity</strong></td>
<td>11.451</td>
<td>13.933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bridging Social Capital</strong></td>
<td>3.710</td>
<td>3.698</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) respondents who indicated having a registered Myspace account, regardless of additional site usage  
\(^b\) respondents who indicated having a registered Facebook account, regardless of additional site usage  
\(^c\) proportion of users who responded “agree” or “strongly agree” that they regularly engage in the activity
both Myspace and Facebook users indicated regularly spending time in person with the 
people on their respective friend lists.

In terms of general site usage, Facebook users reported logging in more 
frequently (daily vs. weekly), spending more time on average per login (15-30 minutes 
vs. less than 15 minutes), and having more friends in their contact list (100-200 friends 
vs. 99 or fewer) than Myspace users. Thus, it is not surprising that the average site-
specific social networking intensity was lower for Myspace users than for Facebook 
users. Lastly, it is important to note that although Facebook and Myspace users clearly 
differ on several characteristics, there appears to be very little difference in mean level of 
bridging capital between Myspace and Facebook users. If social factors like race and 
education are associated with bridging capital in general, then this could suggest that 
using a particular type of site varies the influence of such characteristics among online 
social networkers.

Responses to the open-ended survey questions provide further insight to the 
specific ways people use each site. As is also implied by the descriptive percentages, 
many users remarked that the best thing about online social networking in general 
(regardless of site) is maintaining offline ties—keeping in touch with family and friends, 
both those who live far away and those who they encounter in person on a regular basis. 
One user, an undergraduate student who uses both Myspace and Facebook, summed up 
this general benefit of online social networking:

“It only takes a minute to touch base with everyone, see pictures, find out how 
they’re doing. I contact people I can’t visit, like getting to see my sister’s new 
baby even tho [sic] she lives in China and my mom can check in without calling. 
Also I can see what all my friends here are up to and tell them what I’m doing and 
it doesn’t take a lot of time.”

25
A small portion of users indicated being relatively inactive social networkers, specifically in regard to their Myspace accounts, which may in part help explain why social networking intensity tends to be lower for Myspace users. A number of older users reported having opened a Myspace account solely to keep an eye on the content of their children’s profiles and, similarly, several students indicated that they joined the website only to check up on boyfriends or girlfriends. More than three dozen undergraduate student users indicated that they login to Myspace only occasionally because they “started going to college and finally ‘graduated’ to using Facebook,” further reinforcing the idea that the respective user populations are differentiated by social standing.

Interestingly, among those who indicated a preference for using one site over the other (n=147), the stated preference was almost evenly split—approximately 48 percent preferred Myspace and 52 percent preferred Facebook. Further, more than half of the respondents with a preference indicated that their choice was largely guided not by specific site characteristics but rather by practicality: “I just use it more because that’s what most of my close friends use.” Thus, some social divides might be reproduced online because existing offline networks influence the choice of tools used to create and maintain online networks. Yet the overall user comments did not imply that using one site was exactly the same as using another; rather, many responses suggested that Myspace and Facebook each fulfill very different types of user needs. Among the best things users specifically noted about using Myspace included the ability to customize, access entertainment, and to make new friends:

“individualized profile pages, not everybody’s looks the same, you can change it around a lot and be yourself”
“it’s fun to see all the new bands and listen to music on their myspace for free”
“music, pictures, videos, cool people”
“getting to meet people from all over the country and world that you wouldn’t ordinarily get a chance to cause Facebook is more for people you already know”

Conversely, Facebook users commonly mentioned a more professional appearance, educated members, and the ability to manage offline contacts as the most positive aspects of using the site:

“Looks much more professional and less juvenile like Myspace and the high school feel…easy to post a nice looking profile and not have to worry about picking themes or backgrounds”
“I’ve found more people with my interests and level of education on Facebook than on other networks”
“Just about everybody uses Facebook incl [sic] my parents. I can talk to all my friends I want even if schedules are crazy. Just leave little messages to say hi and let them know what’s [sic] going on. And its a good way to learn more about the people in your classes and at work.”
“Feeds are the best part. I don’t have to go check everyone’s page but I can see what they’re doing almost like being right there with them.”

In addition, a surprising number of faculty members (22% of those who responded to the question) noted that Facebook allowed them to feel more connected to their students, to keep up with emerging technology, and in some instances was used as a classroom resource. As one professor described:

“I’m a Facebook supporter. I usually have 120+ students, so I use FB to get to know them a little better and see what they are up to. They like it and it makes me more accessible to them, and it’s easy to use for setting up a class discussion group. At the same time I improve my computer skills and keep informed re: online. Some colleagues are against communicating with students like this but I’ve never had a problem.”

Thus, consistent with my expectations, Facebook appears to be more useful in terms of providing tools for building professional connections and for developing and maintaining relationships with offline ties. On the other hand, Myspace seems to provide a better venue for creativity, personal expression, and creating new online ties, although
some comments also suggest that younger users may “outgrow” Myspace once they transition to college. This further supports the idea that Myspace is better tailored for developing many bridging relationships, but that using both sites together may be the most advantageous way for users to benefit from online social networking.

Despite the different emphases regarding what is good about Myspace and Facebook, however, no clear-cut differences emerged in the things that users dislike about each site. Responses addressing the negative aspects were similar for both sites, most notably regarding general concerns about online privacy and advertising:

“Potential privacy issues if your [sic] not careful posting information and other people can ‘tag’ you in pictures you don’t want posted. Bosses and family members might not like what’s in your profile and it could get you into trouble”

“way too much advertising all over the place and they use my personal info to target ads”

“Millions of little applications that are a time-suck! Its easy to get caught up and waste a lot of time. Some are confusing and ask for personal details”

“Too many random people wanting to be your friend. Sometimes I added them and then find out it’s a creeper. And some people I use to know that I don’t want to see again but it’s hard to say no when someone asks [to be your friend]”

Although these data do not adequately explore such issues, concerns about privacy and the potential consequences of sharing private lives online (e.g. losing one’s job, offending one’s parents) may substantially impact the degree to which people use online tools for managing social relationships. In addition, some comments suggest that the pressure to “friend” others and to reciprocate all friend requests may sometimes become burdensome. Social networking websites may be a useful part of one’s social toolkit, but it is also important to examine under which conditions the costs of making new friends and reconnecting with old ones online may be perceived as outweighing the benefits. These could be particularly rich areas for future study of online social networking.
Impact of Social Networking on Bridging Capital

To test the hypotheses regarding the effects of online social networking on bridging capital in the aggregate and by specific site, I conducted multiple regression analyses. Table 3 presents the results for the aggregate sample. In regard to social status, undergraduate and graduate students have lower bridging capital compared to faculty members. Additionally, both race and gender are positively associated with bridging capital. This finding may seem somewhat counterintuitive, especially in regard to race, given that social science research often shows how minority status negatively impacts individuals. Yet, a portion of the bridging capital measure focuses on time spent with diverse others, and it is likely that people who are not white tend to interact more often with people of dissimilar racial backgrounds than vice-versa\(^4\). The key finding is that, net of other factors, social networking intensity is positively related to bridging capital (\(b=.086, p<.001\)). This result lends support to hypothesis 1.

The orthogonal comparison variables represent a test of hypotheses 2-4, respectively. Coefficients for orthogonally-coded variables are difficult to interpret, but the important part is significance. A positive significant result indicates that a group has greater bridging capital than its counterpart, while a negative significant result indicates less bridging capital. As shown in the table, hypothesis 2 is not supported—the contrast

\(^4\) Putnam (2000) argued that the more diverse a community, the less likely its inhabitants are to trust others. He further argued that increasing diversity breeds distrust among racial/ethnic groups and weakens social capital (Putnam 2007). Although I did not include any measure of trust in this study, a population from a single university might be very broadly conceived as a loose community. Thus, my finding that race is associated with increased bridging capital may perhaps contradict Putnam’s conclusions. However, any extended discussion of trust or physical community lies beyond the scope of this paper.
Table 3.3. Regression of bridging capital on social status and social networking variables for the aggregate sample (n=929).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.183***</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>.149***</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (logged)</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>-.323***</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>-.165**</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networking Intensity</td>
<td>.086***</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-user vs. User</td>
<td>1.98E-05</td>
<td>6.77E-05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses both sites vs. Uses only one site</td>
<td>1.93E-04*</td>
<td>7.49E-05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myspace only vs. Facebook only</td>
<td>6.75E-05</td>
<td>2.12E-04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.776</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>18.038</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001

for non-users compared to all users is non-significant. Coupled with some respondents’ comments that they rarely used their accounts, this may imply that simply being a member of a social networking site is not sufficient to fully develop the weak-tie networks that increase bridging capital. Rather, being an active user is necessary. Like any other tool, it may only be useful to the degree that one uses it as such.

Similarly, hypothesis 3 that Myspace users have greater bridging capital than Facebook users is not supported. The contrast for those who use Myspace only compared to those who use Facebook only was non-significant, which is not unexpected in light of the earlier finding in the descriptive analyses that there is little difference in mean bridging capital between Myspace and Facebook users as a group. These results do provide support for hypothesis 4, however—bridging capital is significantly higher for users of both Myspace and Facebook as compared to those who use only one of the sites.
To test H_{5a-b} regarding moderation by site type, I added all interaction terms for each of the contrast variables by each of the predictors to the previous regression model (results not shown). An increment to R^2 test indicated that the interaction model accounted for significantly more variance than the model without interactions (R^2=.212, F_{15,909} = 5.3536, p<.01). I then tested for specific effects by including each interaction term one at a time in separate equations. Hypothesis 5a was not supported—there were no significant interactions for Myspace only users compared to Facebook only users. Only the terms including the contrast for using both sites compared to using just a single site were significant, providing support for hypothesis 5b, so I conducted separate regressions for these two subgroups of users.

Table 3.4. Regression of bridging capital on social status variables and social networking for Myspace only or Facebook only users and for users of both sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single site (n=308)</th>
<th>Both sites (n=262)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.160 **</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (logged)</td>
<td>0.090 **</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>-0.432 ***</td>
<td>0.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>-0.419 ***</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networking Intensity</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.440</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>8.953</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R^2</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001

As Table 4 indicates, the effect of undergraduate and graduate student status remains fairly consistent across multiple-site and single site-users; as in the analyses
including the aggregate sample, students have lower bridging capital compared to faculty. Being female is positively related to bridging capital for single-site users but is not significant for users of both, although it is important to note here that the magnitude of the change in effect was not sufficient for moderation because the gender interaction term was not significant in the preceding regression. However, the effects of race, income, and social networking intensity differ substantially for each type of site usage. To better illustrate, Figures 1-3 present the graphed interaction effects.

Figure 1 shows the differential effect of race on bridging capital. There is no association between race and bridging capital for those who use only one site, but for people who use both Myspace and Facebook, race has a strong positive relationship with bridging capital. Perhaps this might suggest that people who only use one site tend to maintain fewer ties with people who are racially different from themselves—this may be particularly true for those who use Facebook only since the site appears to be more socially homogeneous than Myspace. This finding also echoes the suggestion that Facebook and Myspace attract socially different users, so using both together increases the chance of interaction with a diverse range of people.

Figure 2 presents the effect of household income for both types of site usage. Income is significantly related to bridging capital in each case, but the direction of the effect changes. For users of Myspace or Facebook only, bridging capital increases as income increases, but the reverse is true for users of both sites. It makes sense that using both sites might diminish the effect of income on bridging capital, but it is somewhat puzzling that higher income would actually reduce bridging capital among such users. I suspect that this result may in part be due to the higher proportion of students (lower
mean income) compared to faculty (higher mean income) who use both sites, and possibly because students also tend to have higher social networking intensity. If those who earn more money and use both sites are likely to network to a lesser degree, then they may get smaller returns to bridging capital compared to those who have less income but tend to use both sites at greater usage intensity. Perhaps there is a third-order interaction effect among these variables, but testing this premise is beyond the bounds of this investigation and remains a task for future research.

The findings represented in Figure 3 support the premise that type of site and usage intensity both play crucial roles in the relationship between online social networking and bridging capital. There is no meaningful effect of social networking intensity for those who use only one site, but bridging capital increases significantly as intensity increases for people who use both Myspace and Facebook. Those who use only a single site, even at the greatest level of participation, may not gain much in terms of bridging capital if the user base of the site is limited to people who are socially similar. However, the active use of more than one site may better facilitate the development of many diverse weak-tie relationships that bridge networks. Overall, the findings suggest that the use of Myspace in conjunction with Facebook coupled with a greater intensity of usage is the strongest contributor to increased bridging capital.
Figure 3.1. Relationship between race and bridging capital by type of site use.

Figure 3.2. Relationship between income and bridging capital by type of site use.
Figure 3.3. Relationship between social networking intensity and bridging capital by type of site use.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Using Putnam’s (2000) conception of bridging capital, the main goal of this study was to examine the relationship between online social networking and bridging capital. In particular, I investigated who uses social networking sites, the ways in which people use such sites, and how online social networking influences the production of bridging capital. Furthermore, I also considered how user and usage characteristics vary between two popular social networking sites, Myspace and Facebook, and how those differences relate to bridging social capital.

Specifically, I hypothesized that online social networking is positively related to bridging capital. Social networking intensity was associated with increased bridging social capital, but I further expected that social networking site users would have more bridging capital than non-users, and that Myspace users would have more bridging capital than Facebook users. However, both of these latter relationships were non-significant and neither respective hypothesis was supported. The strongest support was found for hypotheses 4, specifying that those who use both Myspace and Facebook would have more bridging capital than those who only use one site. Further, I also hypothesized that the relationship between online social networking and bridging capital is moderated by the type of site used, but this was only supported only in regard to the use of multiple sites compared to the use of a single site. Using both Myspace and Facebook together,
as opposed to using only one site, magnifies the positive effect of race and social networking intensity on bridging capital. Conversely, using both of the sites reverses the positive effect of income on bridging capital.

The results of the current study also show that the majority of respondents engage in social networking on at least one site, but that there are some differences between those who choose to spend time networking online and those who do not. Whites, faculty, and people who earn higher incomes were more likely to be non-users. By contrast, students and minorities were substantially more likely to engage in online social networking. This form of social networking may be less popular among people with higher overall social status, perhaps because such status affords greater access to resources and social connections and thus provides less motivation to explore alternate ways of developing social networks. Yet it is interesting that there was no significant difference in bridging capital between users and non-users after other variables were controlled, even though non-users initially had a higher mean level of bridging capital than non-users. This may in turn imply that people whose social locations are associated with lower status may be the ones who benefit most from time spent online.

Most people used these social networking sites to blend their online and offline worlds, maintaining connections with friends and family and spending time in person with many of their online contacts. However, there are some distinct differences in typical usage by site. Facebook users tend to focus more on managing existing offline ties, while Myspace users may focus more on creating new ties with people they meet online. These data include no information about the specific social status characteristics of users’ online friends, but the different patterns of usage could suggest that Facebook
friend networks more closely mirror the user’s offline relationships. Thus, if online contacts consist mostly of similar others, then site-specific social networking may provide fewer resources in terms of diverse relationships. By contrast, users who more frequently create new weak ties online may have connections with a more diverse network of people and ultimately reap more in terms of bridging capital. Among those who do engage in social networking, then, using more than one site may be one way to narrow the gap in bridging social capital due to other factors.

The additional finding that single site users more frequently chose Facebook further suggests that the site may be more useful in terms of “networking” in the conventional sense of developing relationships rather than for just socializing. Nearly half of those who engaged in social networking actively used both sites, implying that both have something unique to offer. If the use of one site is qualitatively different from the use of another, then recognizing and understanding these differences is important for future research.

Although I did not replicate Putnam’s voluntary participation measures, my results join other studies which question the erosion of America’s bridging social capital. For a great number of people, many traditional environments for social activity have shifted online, but the interaction that occurs is inherently social nonetheless. The data presented here suggest that online social networking is one of the many ways that people are using the Internet as a location for social exchange. My methods certainly do not allow for a causal argument, but there is clearly a positive relationship between online social networking and the production of bridging social capital. As usage intensity increases, so does bridging capital. Of course, it may be that bridging capital increases as
a result of online social networking, but it may also be that people with more bridging capital tend to self-select into using social networking sites as a tool to better manage existing social connections. Longitudinal data would be needed to further examine whether online social networking is a cause or an effect of bridging capital.

One primary limitation to this study is the general lack of consensus on the best way to measure social capital, and as numerous other researchers have noted, the added dimension of online activity further complicates the situation (Wellman et al. 2001; Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004; Williams 2006). I used Putnam’s framework to examine bridging capital, yet as noted there is some dispute as to whether his conception adequately reflects social capital theory (e.g. Paxton 1999). In addition, the Internet Social Capital Scale which is based on Putnam’s dimensions of bridging capital (Williams 2006) has not been widely tested. The development of measurement tools that complement existing methods of gauging social capital and better integrate the online realm of social interaction is an area for future research consideration.

In addition, the sample used in this research restricts the ability to generalize to a larger population. These data are unique in that they include faculty and graduate students in addition to undergraduate students, but there was no random sampling and participants all came from a single university. It is also important to note again that the subsamples of Myspace and Facebook users in the descriptive analyses are not mutually exclusive groups—many of the respondents use both sites. However, the main goal was not to define a perfect prediction model but rather to identify patterns and reveal the overall effect of using each site.
Similarly, I should note that the number of non-white respondents in the analyses was rather small—this is particularly true of the analyses pertaining to various sub-groups of the sample (e.g. comparisons of Myspace and Facebook users, which also necessarily exclude those respondents who do not do any online social networking). Thus, results should only be generalized with caution. Oversampling of minority respondents would be useful in future studies addressing diversity among Internet users.

In retrospect, one additional limitation of these data is the lack of comments from respondents who did not use social networking sites. I suspect that some respondents were non-users due to less experience and fewer online skills, lack of regular access to a computer at home, or a prior negative experience with online social networking. Such data would be useful in future research exploring the differences between users and non-users, particularly for highlighting where there may be patterns of inequality in terms of acquiring the skills and equipment needed to use Internet resources effectively.

Certainly, this study is also a small part of the research lending support to the premise that social capital is not decreasing inasmuch as it is changing. Even though the conventional avenues of building and maintaining social ties may show some evidence of decline, future empirical data considering Internet use are likely to indicate a shift in mode rather than a general withering of social interaction (Boase et al. 2005; McPherson et al. 2006; Stern 2006). Even Putnam himself recognized that the usual ways in which we participate in social exchange are rapidly changing: “I am worried that I will end up in the long sweep of history having written a book about disconnection at the very moment that technology was changing the equation” (Uchitelle 2000: par. 2).
The strength of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of sociological research regarding the influence of Internet-related activities on the social community. Going online has become a large part of the contemporary social fabric, but we still have much to learn. Social networking sites appear to provide a valuable tool for building and maintaining the weak social ties that give way to bridging social capital, but there may be differential effects depending on the particular site and on the particular user. Most studies that have considered online social networking have collapsed the use of all sites into a single category or considered only the use of one site (e.g. Ellison et al. 2006). Yet the results presented here also suggest that different people use different sites at different rates for different purposes—thus, not all social networking websites are equal. The examination of online social networking in the aggregate may hide significant distinctions between certain sites.

Without much long term data, however, it remains difficult to predict the full range of potential benefits and consequences associated with online social networking. This is a particularly rich area for further study. Future researchers might explore quality versus quantity of online relationships and the potential difficulties of using the sites to effectively manage larger and denser networks of weak ties. Subsequent examination could also provide a broader survey of a variety of social networking websites and how they may differ from one another. Longitudinal data and nationally representative samples would represent important contributions to our understanding of online social networking and its effect on social capital.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

IRB APPROVAL FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

Date: May 19, 2008

To: Angela M. Addins
Sociology Department
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio 44325-1905

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator

Re: IRB Number 3008508
"Myspace, Facebook and the Strength of Internet Ties: The Impact of Online Social Networking on Bridging Social Capital"

Thank you for submitting your Exemption Request for the referenced study. Your request was approved on May 16, 2008. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

☐ Exemption 1 - Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices.

☒ Exemption 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.

☐ Exemption 3 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

☐ Exemption 4 - Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

☒ Exemption 5 - Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.

☐ Exemption 6 - Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study's design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact me to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Cc: Rebecca Erickson - Advisor
Cc: Rosalie Hall - IRB Chair
Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Akron, OH 44325-2102
330-972-7666 • 330-972-6286 Fax

☒ Approved consent form/s enclosed